
The Book Forum

Pauling and Vitamin C

Vitamin C and the Common Cold, by Linus Pauling, 122 pp, 2 illus, \$1.95, paper \$1.35, San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1970.

The many admirers of Linus Pauling will wish that he had not written this book. Here are found, not the guarded statements of a philosopher or scientist seeking truth, but the clear, incisive sentences of an advertiser with something to sell. Unfortunately, many laymen are going to believe the ideas that the author is selling—that ascorbic acid is a completely harmless chemical which will prevent or mollify infectious diseases such as the common cold, if taken in doses of from 1 to 10 gm daily throughout life, and possibly extend that lifetime from two to six years. Actually, when used as recommended by Professor Pauling, neither the safety of all dosage forms, nor the efficacy of ascorbic acid in any dosage form, has been proved.

Pauling hopes that there will be a thorough, large-scale study on vitamin C and the common cold. Because he has already convinced himself that vitamin C in large doses does avert or ameliorate the common cold, the question arises: What kind of research does he have in mind? In reviewing published reports, Pauling explains negative findings by implying that positive results would have been obtained if larger doses of vitamin C had been employed. He explains differences in response of patients by quoting Roger Williams' phrase, "biological individuality." The research which Pauling is recommending, it would seem, is not a study to determine the facts, but a compilation of data for him to fit into the pattern of his argument.

This book is irritating, in the physiological sense, for it stimulates thoughts and an urge to express them, so that a review longer than the book could easily be developed. That in fact is likely to happen when in time historians of science puzzle over the obvious impatience of its distinguished author to get things done before the necessary steps in laboratory and clinic are taken.

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